



## EDGAR

### THE FALCONER'S SON

<sup>1</sup> The sparrowhawk is a bird of prey, about the size of a small crow. Though sparrowhawks were easily obtained and inexpensive, they were difficult to tame.

<sup>2</sup> Prime was a church service held near dawn.

<sup>3</sup> The mews were a sort of stable where hunting birds were housed.

<sup>4</sup> Saint John's should be pronounced in the English way: "SIN-jinns." The sport of hawking was popular among monks and nuns, which is why Simon would be allowed to keep his bird in the abbey mews.

Listen now, my sparrowhawk,<sup>1</sup>  
The stars are fading. Soon the bell  
For Prime<sup>2</sup> will ring. I'll raise thy hood,  
Untie thy leash, and fare thee well.  
The mews<sup>3</sup> are all but emptied now,  
The great birds auctioned, one by one —  
One single sparrowhawk is left:  
The one tamed by the falconer's son.

And that's thyself. Master Simon's  
Off to be a monk, and thou  
Must ride his fist to Saint John's<sup>4</sup> Abbey,  
Save that I will free thee now.  
I will not leave thee to his care.  
I know young Simon. I know thee.  
I'll loose thy jesses, cast thee off —  
Even though they punish me.

'Twas I who stole thee, two years hence,  
Climbed to the heights with many a qualm,  
Scooped thee from thy mother's nest.  
I felt thy heart beat 'gainst my palm.  
I was the one who filled thy crop —  
I fed thee, stroked thee, day and night.

## EDGAR

### THE FALCONER'S SON

When now, my sparrowhawk,<sup>1</sup>  
The stars are fading. Soon the bell  
Prime<sup>2</sup> will ring. I'll raise thy hood,  
And take thy leash, and fare thee well.  
The mews<sup>3</sup> are all but emptied now,  
The birds auctioned, one by one —  
The sparrowhawk is left:  
I am the falconer's son.

Thyself, Master Simon's  
Thou art, and thou  
Thou art, Saint John's<sup>4</sup> Abbey,  
Thou art, thee now.  
Thou art, his care.  
Thou art, I know thee.  
Thou art, thee off —

Thence,  
Thou art, the qualm,

Thou wast my captive and my child —  
All savageness and appetite.

And it was I who gentled thee,  
I was the one who drew the thread  
That seeled thy eyelids.<sup>5</sup> And for thee  
I hungered and forsook my bed.  
Long in the night I walked the floor,  
Carrying thee upon my glove.  
I fed thee dainties — mice and eels,  
Adder skin and heart of dove.

But now the manor's bankrupt, failed.  
The master's hawking days are done.  
The mews are empty, save for thee:  
Property of the master's son.  
But Simon will not tend to thee.  
He would let thee starve and pine —  
A callow,<sup>6</sup> shallow, pampered youth.  
By law of justice, thou art mine.

And being mine, at break of day,  
The hour comes for us to part.  
I'll loose thee, Splendid, come what may,  
Even though it break my heart.  
Neither of us will shed a tear  
The moment when I set thee free —  
Thy valor taught me scorn for fear.  
What care I what they do to me?

<sup>1</sup>In the early stages of taming a bird, the bird's eyelids were "seeled" — sewn shut. This was said to calm the bird (it wouldn't calm me).

<sup>6</sup>The word callow is actually a term from falconry. It refers to a nestling — Edgar is saying that Simon is immature.

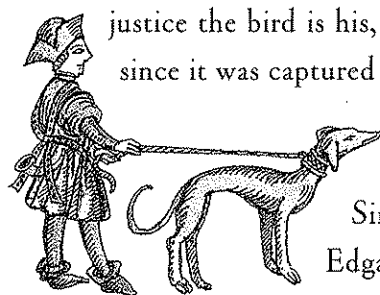
# "One single sparrowhawk is left. . . ."

## A LITTLE BACKGROUND FALCONRY

Falconry, or hawking, was one of the most popular sports of the Middle Ages. Though hawking had a practical purpose—obtaining meat for the table—this was perhaps less important than the excitement and prestige the sport provided. Large birds of prey were status symbols because they were so expensive. It took time and infinite patience to train a bird for hunting. A falconer like Edgar's father was better paid and of higher social status than a groom or varlet.

The gear associated with hunting birds was artfully made. A bird would require a carefully crafted leather hood, jesses (strips of leather attached to the talons), and a leash, which tethered the bird to its perch. A well-trained falcon might be worth her weight in gold. (I say *her* because female birds were larger and stronger than males.) When a falconer fed his bird, he stroked her with one of her own feathers, often accompanying the feeding and stroking with a scrap of melody: always the same song. This was part of the taming process.

In this monologue, Edgar is gambling that the punishment for setting Simon's hawk free will not be more than he can bear. Though he claims that by



justice the bird is his, by the law of the land it belongs to Simon's father, since it was captured on his land. Because tamed raptors were so valuable, the penalty for stealing one—which is what Edgar is doing—could be imprisonment or mutilation. Since in this particular case the bird is of little value, Edgar may be lucky enough to get off with a whipping.



